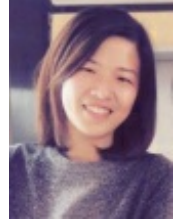


Book Review: Digital Dilemmas: Power, Resistance and the Internet by M. I. Franklin

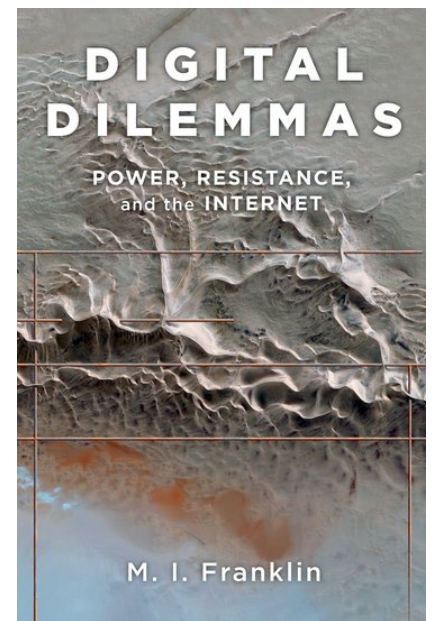
*How are digital landscapes being incorporated into public space and what does this mean for civic engagement? In **Digital Dilemmas**, M.I. Franklin considers how publics, nation-states, and multilateral institutions are being continually reinvented in local and global decision-making domains that are accessed and controlled by a relative few. This well-researched tome of contemporary digital dilemmas positions itself well among other works that have been published within the discipline, writes **Nikki Soo**. It is well-suited for experienced media researchers and policymakers with existing knowledge of the field.*



Digital Dilemmas: Power, Resistance and the Internet. M. I. Franklin.
Oxford University Press. December 2013.

Find this book:

As technology progresses, it is inevitable that accompanying debates around responsibility, resistance, and power will also evolve and throw up new issues for academics to study. For example, in the realm of politics and the public sphere, it is evident that the inability to draw distinct boundaries around media spheres is causing problems when it comes to information being shared across the internet. Additionally, sociologist and protest movement scholar [Dieter Rucht](#) has asserted that various protest periods have been characterised by varying media patterns, hence making distinct generalisations regarding media and movements complicated to support. And [William Gamson](#) has observed that media coverage of collective action movements varies considerably from issue to issue.



With the internet still a fairly new phenomenon, academics have had to draw on prevailing multidisciplinary theories within the social sciences when attempting to understand events believed to be digitally precipitated. Media scholars agree that as a result of various forms of media interacting and connecting, information flows are no longer contained within technological, social, and geographical boundaries. Hence, the real challenge lies in identifying the variables and conditions that enable these movements, alongside an extensive understanding of the social, psychological, political, and media contexts.



Recognising this caveat, [M.I. Franklin](#) offers an intricate tripartite study with the following aims in mind. The first aim is twofold: empirically, to unpack moments in the way people use internet media and communications spontaneously to serve their immediate individual or community needs in relation to those forces looking to appropriate its critical resources for vested interests; and theoretically, to provide conceptually innovative, historically and empirically nuanced reconsideration of the internet's recent past, fast-changing present, and far-from-decided future. In this context Franklin links existing literature encompassing techno-positivism, pessimism, socio-political changes, economic growth, and transparency. Secondly, the book aims to provide a rigorous analysis of internet trends that tend to be treated in macro, one-dimensional, and non-historical manners by arguing that the explorations of interconnections need to include 'conceptualisations of the internet as a large-scale "machine" and complex ecosystem of microscopic "cybernetic organisms" in ways that can take into account how its constituent morphologies and anatomies wax and wane, through use and non-uses, access and denial of access and the (global) politics of design'. Lastly, it is hoped that the case studies and accompanying theoretical streams are able to successfully bind scholarly analysis of both broader and intimate dimensions between the distinct intersecting dynamics of technological, sociocultural, and political-economic changes.

Franklin lays the foundation of her book in Chapter 2 with a theoretical framework that requires what she terms a 'paradigm reset', a concept she distinguishes from Thomas Kuhn's idea of the 'paradigm shift'. She convincingly emphasises the need to re-politicise the internet and its constituent technologies in a manner that allows us to recognise that they are products of sociocultural and political economic forces simultaneously experiencing historical change. Inspired by the work of mid-twentieth century social and cultural theorist [Michel de Certeau](#), Franklin emphasises the importance of recognising that mediated, enhanced communications make sense firstly through the way people make use of (new or established) social networks. These networks are in motion concurrently, resulting in users who are anchored yet able to leave the local. Although this novel concept might initially seem difficult to grasp, Franklin's concise writing proves otherwise, setting the tone for the rest of the book.



Credit: [hdzimmerman](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

The book is organised around three case studies with the overarching themes of technology and politics. Each case is presented in its own chapter, with the outcome of the research in its respective timeframe simultaneously updated and reassessed with the emergence of newer developments. Chapter 3 considers the 'Browser Wars' by spotlighting on a number of high-profile disputes occurring over control of the internet. This includes Microsoft's anti-competitive practice scuffles with the U.S. Department of Justice (in 1998), and the European Union (in 2005 and 2007), which are chronologically tracked and analysed. Further in the chapter Franklin recreates this case in a present-day context by contemplating Google's dominant Web 2.0 position, accentuating how these power struggles are symptomatic of a persistent impasse between vested commercial interests and advocates of a socially inclusive and egalitarian internet.

These high-level struggles are discussed further in Chapter 5 with a shift towards understanding how digital media and the internet have impacted the way scholars, policy makers, and activists regard their publics. Franklin draws on five years of ethnographic research as a participant-observer at the [United Nations Internet Governance Forum](#), more specifically, during the drafting and launching of a Charter of Human Rights and Principle for the Internet in 2013. Franklin's descriptive anecdotes and research investigation allow greater insight towards macro-level decision-making on a global scale, convincing the reader that the UN's digital rights initiatives are more imperative now than ever.

Franklin cements her book's argument in the conclusion by reconciling the three case studies with her initial theoretical framework, terming it a 'paradigm reboot'. She reminds the reader once again that existing technological, social, and cultural critiques neglect the minutiae of everyday practices and cultures. Through social constructivist analyses of her case studies and persuasive writing, the saliency of her compelling hypothesis is reinforced. It is apparent that Franklin has achieved what she set out to do with this book.

Overall, this well-researched tome of contemporary digital dilemmas positions itself well among other works that have been published within the discipline. By examining specific cases in-depth against a comprehensive hypothesis, Franklin provides a nuanced argument and refreshing perspective on the complex and ever-changing dynamics brought about by the Internet. This work certainly has the potential to enrich current academic, political, and public debates, once again reiterating the need for developing new theories and approaches when investigating contemporary issues.

However, a point worth noting is that the specialist terminology and theories employed by the author may be overwhelming for novice readers. In this regard, this complex but well-argued book is much better suited for experienced researchers and policymakers with existing knowledge of the field.

Nikki Soo is a PhD Candidate at [Royal Holloway, University of London](#). Her research interests are political communication, the use of digital media in campaigning and democratisation. She holds an MA in Public Policy from King's College London, and an MSc in New Political Communication from Royal Holloway. Tweet her at [@sniksw](#). [Read more reviews by Nikki](#).

Related

[Book Review: Going Viral by Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley](#) In "Featured"

[Book Review: Digital Government @ Work: A Social Informatics Perspective by Ian McLoughlin et al](#) In "Britain and Ireland"

[Book Review: Tweeting to Power: The Social Media Revolution in American Politics by Jason Gainous and Kevin M. Wagner](#) In "Media and Cultural Studies book reviews"

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books